

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Caregiving gives appreciation of 'little things'

By Kate Blain
Catholic News Service

Mary-Anne Ross' home is crowded with furniture, boxes and piles of paper. She makes no apologies: "I didn't pretty the place up; I really don't have time to clean."

Ross is an adjunct music teacher at Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y., and a cantor, singer and substitute organist at St. Mary Church there. She is also a full-time caregiver for her father, Joe, who has Alzheimer's disease, and had cared for her mother, Mary, until she died in 2000.

"Caregiving is bigger than I thought," she said, surveying a living room in which a hospital bed is the prominent feature. "It's having a sick child and mourning the loss of them while you're doing it — but you don't get the time to grieve."

Caregivers, she said, soon learn that their task is "not a sprint, it's a marathon," and that they need to "take one day at a time."

Until 1991, Ross was an active, single woman with her own house. Her parents were estranged from one another, living in separate homes in the same town.

She moved in with her mother temporarily to help her recover from gall-bladder surgery. One day, her mother had a severe headache. When Ross noticed her mother's hand was limp, she realized it was actually a stroke.

Her mother lapsed into a coma for two weeks and then woke mentally alert but with her left side paralyzed. During this time, her father came to the hospital to "see what was going on" and ended up reconciling with her mother. Ross believes this is the reason her mother fought to live.

Vehemently against placing her mother in a nursing home, she brought her home. Her father, whom no one yet suspected of



Mary Knight/CNS

Visiting with a homebound or elderly person for an hour or so is a good way to help caregivers in need of support.

having Alzheimer's, moved in as well.

With the contents of three houses packed into one, Ross learned to feed her mother through a tube, change diapers and dispense medication. She also tried to teach music students in her living room.

"It was a zoo!" she exclaimed. "My father, my mother, the students, the caregivers."

Ross had medical help at night, but in

the years of caregiving she only left town briefly three times for musical performances.

"I became a prisoner in a way, because (I had) become so isolated. When my mom was really bad, I couldn't even talk on the phone."

Still, caregiving gave her an appreciation for the little things in life. When fellow parishioners from St. Mary's helped as best they could, she began to "notice that when someone does something even small, it means so much."

About two years before she died, Ross' mother lost the ability to speak. Her father also began acting strangely.

"I would be at school, and he would be rearranging the freezer (or) digging up the plants I had just planted," she recalled.

While she can't remember what made her realize her father had Alzheimer's, she said that eventually the caregivers who came to help with her mother while she taught had to keep an eye on her father as well.

In May 2000, her mother died. Her daughter smiled as she recalled her once-estranged parents kissing and hugging before the end.

"We didn't imagine they had this reconciliation. God really did this," she said. "I know now no matter how bad things get

in my life, God can do absolutely anything."

After her mother's death, Ross' father began to spiral downhill. She believes that he was able to become needier "when the spotlight was on him."

Caregiving once again taught her new lessons about what was important. She joked that when she lost a contact lens, she simply started wearing her glasses; she couldn't be bothered to find it or get new lenses.

Today, a helper takes her father to adult day care and brings him home while she teaches. She is grateful for that, for being able to do her job and for "the people who sit with my dad during church services."

She advised anyone who wants to help a caregiver to simply take notice of their needs: A flower delivered to a bedridden parent can brighten someone's day; sitting with an ill person for an hour can relieve a caregiver who has no time to run everyday errands.

As Catholics, she said, "we're not just supposed to meet for Mass once a week. We're supposed to notice each other's needs and respond to them."

Whatever her father's condition, she said, there are always new lessons to be learned. Helping with physical needs can teach caregivers about what a miracle the human body is, she said.

Her father, who had been sitting quietly during the interview with his daughter, seemingly asleep, decided to play a tune on his harmonica. Ross laughed when she heard the first few notes.

"Do you know what (song) that is?" she said, responding, "There's No Place Like Home."

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